



# NEWS

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## **Agriculture Secretary Announces Additional State Funds for Farm Conservation**

HAMMONTON -- Agriculture Secretary Charles M. Kuperus today visited a Hammonton, Atlantic County, blueberry farm to highlight an additional \$819,000 in the new state budget to provide grants to farmers who carry out conservation projects on farms enrolled in the Farmland Preservation Program.

“This increased financial assistance is important in helping more farmers expand their stewardship role in protecting our soil and water resources,” said Secretary Kuperus. “Protection of our natural resources is a key part of our agricultural smart growth plan for retaining our farms and positioning agriculture for a strong future.”

The State Agriculture Development Committee (SADC), which administers the Farmland Preservation Program, provides grants to landowners to fund up to 50 percent of the costs of approved soil and water conservation projects on farms that are permanently preserved or are in eight-year preservation programs. The FY ‘05 state budget provides \$1.18 million in conservation funding -- an \$819,000 increase over the previous year.

Columbia Fruit Farms in Hammonton in April completed conversion of 24 acres of blueberry fields from overhead irrigation to drip irrigation with the assistance of an \$11,242 grant from the SADC. With the help of similar state grants, the farm over the past 12 years has converted nearly all of its 300 acres to drip irrigation, cutting water use by about 35 percent and fuel costs to run the water pumps in half.

Drip irrigation delivers a low-volume intermittent supply of water at the plant’s base through plastic tubing. The water supply is based on the plant’s needs.

Columbia Fruit Farms is enrolled in an eight-year preservation program. Landowners who enroll their farms in eight-year programs agree to preserve the land for a period of eight years in exchange for certain benefits, including eligibility for soil and water conservation grants.

In addition to irrigation systems, eligible projects under the SADC’s soil and water conservation program include stream protection, sediment retention, erosion or water control systems, animal waste control facilities, diversions, and land shaping or grading.

Landowners seeking grants apply to local soil conservation districts, which assist in developing farm conservation plans and ensure projects are necessary and feasible. Applications are forwarded to the State Soil Conservation Committee, which recommends projects to the SADC for funding approvals.

Columbia Fruit Farms, incorporated in 1962, produces 1.35 million pounds of blueberries annually.

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